

# WOMAN OF SUBSTANCE

*As Michigan's new drug czar, Yvonne Blackmond has concocted a strong prescription for enforcement, education, treatment, and most of all, prevention*

BY ERIC FREEDMAN | PHOTOGRAPH BY JOHN NATHAN URBANEK

**Y**vonne Blackmond recalls her first drink. Not as a junior high student in Watts, where she dreamed of a career as a professional cellist. Nor during high school, when she spent much of her time in church, hung out with "smart kids" in orchestra and dropped into department stores to try on clothes she couldn't afford. And it wasn't on her 21st birthday, nor in the Los Angeles County sheriff's department where she spent 14 years as a "gun-totin' fool."

No, it was the day her older son — now 30 — turned 21, and her husband didn't believe even on that occasion she would try alcohol. The drink was cognac, which she gulped down, and when it hit: "Kapow! Kapow! Okay, God, I won't do that anymore." She didn't.

Now as Gov. Jennifer Granholm's new drug czar — technically director of the Office of Drug Policy — the 50-year-old ex-cop and Southfield resident stands on the forefront of the public-education drive against alcohol, drug and tobacco abuse. Although she traces her personal decision not to drink to a religious upbringing — "We did believe God wouldn't like that" — she witnessed the effects of drugs and alcohol during her time as a deputy sheriff, and among relatives who "made the choice to abuse drugs."

She grew up poor, a self-described tomboy and the fifth of 11 children, and the sheriff's department offered the allure of a steady paycheck to a young mother who had married right after high school. She aced the written exam, character test and physical, then was immediately assigned to jail duty. "It was a bungee jump," she says, "to give a 21-year-old a badge." Within a few hours on her first day on patrol, she found herself in pursuit of a suspect. "You have a keen sense of survival after a short time. You can actually hear a bullet come your way. You want to get home alive." She spent part of her first lunch date with husband-to-be Harrison Blackmond on the firing range so she could requalify with her 38.

In all, she spent half her law-enforcement career in plainclothes and working on drug prevention, education and community outreach. "I arrested a lot of people, but I wanted to be the front end," she says. Although she'd just passed the exam for promotion to sergeant, she quit in 1987 to move to Michigan, where her husband took a job. Ex-prosecutor Harrison Blackmond is now a business consultant and director of human resources and strategic planning for the Detroit Empowerment Zone, as well as a vice-chair of the Greater Detroit Chamber of Commerce and former business associate of Granholm's husband, Dan Mulhern.

She landed at Starr Commonwealth, a non-profit human services agency, where she was director of development and community relations

until Granholm summoned her to Lansing, saying, "Yvonne is the kind of leader who steps up to the plate ready to get the job done."

Harrison Blackmond describes his wife as someone "who makes it hard to say no." When she proposed a celebrity fashion show to raise money for Starr Commonwealth, for instance, his reaction was "Yvonne, this is a terrible idea." But she collected business cards from people at a conference on Mackinac Island, "mostly guys who didn't realize she was going to hold them to it," launching what became a successful annual fundraising and friend-raising event.

Blackmond's new office — decorated with stuffed animals, family snapshots, a cap from the Detroit field office of the Drug Enforcement Administration and a cello-shaped penholder from the Interlochen Center for the Arts — is a far cry from the Los Angeles street corner where she once confronted a 6-foot-2-inch, high-on-PCP suspect who was carrying nunchuks. She no longer carries a badge and gun. Even so, she sees herself as a warrior on a mission on the same battlefield she trod in the streets: "I believe in law enforcement, I believe in treatment, I'm strong on prevention."

When she talks about substance abuse, she peppers her conversations and presentations with "the two C words" and with "three key messages." The two C words: "choices" and "consequences." The messages: "There are no disposable kids, not even one. We believe we can restore people back to dignity," and "accountability."

Blackmond sounds decidedly optimistic. "There is no such thing as an ugly person or a bad person," she says, and she preaches, "People do bad things, but that doesn't mean you're bad."

She also talks animatedly about service and her "servant-leadership mentality." On a trip to Washington many years ago, she stood alone in front of the Capitol. "I was talking to the building or to God," she says, asking one or the other of them, "Where would I best be of service?"

An answer came one Friday earlier this year as she drove from Chelsea to Detroit. Her cell phone rang and she turned off *The Lion King* CD. It was Granholm on the other end, saying, "Welcome to my team." When the governor asked her to keep the appointment secret until the formal announcement, Blackmond answered, "Do you mind if I call my mother?" And at the end of the call, Blackmond said, "I guess I'll be going back to *The Lion King*." "Hakuna matata," the governor replied.

"I really wanted this job," Blackmond says. "I am a dreamer. I'm one of those who can visualize and then find a way to get there." ■

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— YVONNE BLACKMOND

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